

The Christian News-Letter

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Edited by
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THIS NEWS-LETTER CONVEYS TO ALL our readers our heartiest good wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

It will arrive in the midst of preparations for the celebration of Christmas, when few people have much leisure for reading. There is not likely to be any objection, therefore, to a shorter letter than usual, which is a necessary economy to compensate for the eight additional pages in our last issue.

What we expect our readers to appreciate warmly is Mr. Mairet's Supplement on "Pictures of the Nativity". Mr. Philip Mairet is the Editor of the *New English Weekly* and has been a member of the editorial board of the Christian News-Letter from its beginning in 1939. In these seven years he has never missed one of its regular meetings, at first weekly and later fortnightly, except on the few occasions when absence was unavoidable.

It is when we recover by meditation and worship a renewed sense of the meaning of the event which took place at Christmas, as the "pivotal reality of the world in which we live", that we can truly rejoice even in the bleakness and harshness of present conditions and amid the uncertainties which cloud the future. Christmas is the perpetual reminder of the coming into our world of new powers from another

NEWS-LETTER

CHRISTMAS

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SUPPLEMENT

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BY

PHILIP MAIRET

order or dimension of existence and is for this reason an unfailing source of the renewal of life.

It is impossible for us, however, at this time to shut out from our rejoicings the recollection of the millions in Central Europe who are experiencing in their bodies, minds and souls the catastrophic aftermath of war. Christmas is the festival of humanity, in which we celebrate the restoration of our manhood to its true dignity by the coming of the "second Adam". No apology is needed, therefore, for linking in this News-Letter our Christmas rejoicings with the utter misery which overwhelms a large part of the population of Germany and Austria and threatens the very humanity of those who are its victims.

THE NEED IN CENTRAL EUROPE

The British zone in Germany is in a state of universal malnutrition in the towns and on the brink of a complete collapse of its industrial activities. Psychologically large and increasing numbers are the prey of complete hopelessness and are in danger of surrendering to a nihilism which recognizes no standards of belief or conduct. We cannot in this short News-Letter give details of the conditions of starvation or semi-starvation, over-crowding, squalor, progressive physical deterioration, and alarming increase of diseases, which prevail in German towns. The situation is desperate.

Similar conditions of acute malnutrition and lack of housing accommodation are found in Austria.

CHRISTIAN ACTION

The fundamental remedies can be provided only by governmental action.

There are, however, certain forms of aid which individuals can bring, and it is the bounden duty of Christians to supply them to the extent of their power. It is true that such efforts will not do more than touch the fringe of the misery. But that fact is not the only consideration, nor the decisive consideration. In any great enterprise we have always to begin

by acting where we can, trusting that such action will lead to further action.

When a few weeks ago a Dakota made a crash landing on the Alps, there was an immediate mobilization of the resources of several nations to rescue the eleven passengers and crew. Aeroplanes carried out a persistent search, seventy Swiss climbers set out on the arduous ascent to the scene of the disaster, fleets of jeeps and army cars were assembled in the nearest villages, an army train with doctors, nurses and complete medical equipment was in readiness at Interlaken to transport the survivors to hospitals in which every preparation had been made for their reception. This uncalculating response to the distress of the occupants of the stranded aeroplane and the world-wide sympathy and expectancy which it evoked are in striking contrast with the callous indifference in many quarters to the slow rotting away of human life in Central Europe and the apparent impotence to take adequate measures to arrest it. Nothing could show more clearly the opposed tendencies that are at war in our world. The future of civilization is bound up with the triumph of the determination to save, redeem and enrich human life over selfish indifference to the sufferings of others.

Where human need cries aloud to us, every active response, and every refusal to respond when it is in our power to do so, is a taking sides in the never-ending struggle to preserve our humanity. To send what help we can to Central Europe not only will bring a ray of cheer to some individual victim of a cruel fate but is a deed that hastens the restoration to the world of the divine qualities of compassion and mercy.

In this campaign the warmest tribute must be paid to the work of Mr. Victor Gollancz. Following in the steps of John Howard in an earlier generation, and of other great pioneers of philanthropic reform, he has visited Europe "to survey the mansions of sorrow and pain, to take the gauge and dimensions of misery, depression and contempt",¹ and by his persistent public advocacy has done everything in his

¹ Edmund Burke's description of the work of John Howard in his *Speech at Bristol Previous to the Election*, 1780.

power to enlighten the public mind and arouse the public conscience to the measure of human distress.

WHAT TO DO

The German people are in an extraordinary degree isolated from the world. Everything that can be done to re-establish personal links between individual Germans and their friends in other countries is of value. The fullest advantage should be taken of the permission now granted by the Government to send parcels to individuals in Germany. For those who have no personal friends in that country there are other ways of helping.

Individuals in this country are now permitted to send one parcel of food and one parcel of clothing each month to any individual address in the British, French or American zone in Germany, but not to any sector in Berlin nor to the Russian zone. Food and clothing must not be sent in the same parcel.

The charge for sending a parcel is 3s. for less than 5 lb. and 4s. for 5 to 10 lb. A postal order for the transport charge, together with a stamped reply envelope addressed to the sender, should be sent to SAVE EUROPE NOW, 14 Henrietta Street, London, W.C. 2, who will supply the sender with a label, together with full instructions and a list of the most suitable foods to send. In order to obtain the right label the name of the zone to which the parcel is to be sent should be written in the left-hand corner of the envelope. Particulars about sending parcels to individuals in Austria can be obtained from SAVE EUROPE NOW.

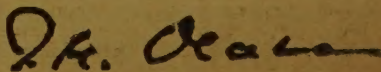
Those who wish to help and have no personal friend or relative in Germany or Austria should send a postal order for 1s. 6d. and a stamped addressed envelope for reply to SAVE EUROPE NOW, 14 Henrietta Street, London, W.C. 2, marking the envelope "Food Relief". A label and further instructions will then be sent to them.

Contributions in money may be sent to SAVE EUROPE NOW, and will be used for general relief in all European countries.

The Ecumenical Refugee Commission of the World Council of Churches in London is now able to buy essential household medical requisites wholesale and ship them to Austria, where there is a serious scarcity of drugs, and important operations have to be performed without an anaesthetic. A well qualified committee in Vienna is responsible for the distribution of the medicines. Contributions for the supply of medicines and other forms of relief in Austria should be sent to the Rev. Henry Carter, Ecumenical Refugee Commission, 21 Bloomsbury Street, London, W.C. 1.

The editor has arrived back from her visit to the United States as this News-Letter goes to press and will resume charge from the next issue.

Yours sincerely,



PICTURES OF THE NATIVITY

BY PHILIP MAIRET

At this midwinter season a great many pictures are exchanged between those who believe more or less deeply in the Christian faith. A large number of these are reproduced from paintings of the Nativity, made upwards of four hundred years ago, some very famous and familiar, some less so but still very beautiful. Again and again it happens that one is made acquainted with yet another of these lovely relics of a great age of religious art, the best of which were regarded by the artists themselves as a kind of "prayer made visible".¹ And pictures, of this and of many other scriptural subjects, were used in those days to help other people as well as the artists in the life of prayer. Since the end of that time, however, new movements of Christian belief and discipline have often rejected all pictorial or plastic aids to devotion as possibly idolatrous. I am not going to discuss the rights and wrongs of the great period of Christian iconoclasm, its fierce controversies about this very thing; though I would observe that even those who were least inclined to give up the use of sculpture and painting seem since to have become less able—at least in Europe—perfectly to combine religious devotion with artistic purpose. According to the same authority as I have just quoted, "it is probable that not a single picture of the Virgin and Child has been painted in Europe during the past century which can rank as a masterpiece, though a few . . . show something of the ancient fervour."

Still, whether we do or do not now produce good works of religious art, and however we think about those we have, many—perhaps most—of us produce religious pictures in our minds. The human mind is made that way, it thinks not only in words, but in images. Shapes and forms, sometimes also sounds and smells, nearly always accompany our words as we think, and no

¹ "Those pictures of the Virgin and Child which the critic or connoisseur regards as most meritorious are usually precisely those which their painters conceived as prayer made visible" (Prof. Thomas Bodkin, in his introduction to the Faber Gallery Book, *The Virgin and Child*).

less as we pray. Some may pay no attention to this accompaniment, in some it may be so faint and fitful a background to their consciousness that they do not believe it is really there; some may regard it only as a liability, a distraction. But this activity of the inward senses can powerfully help as well as hinder devotion. Whether it does so depends chiefly on the one-ness of will, feeling and thought in the person worshipping, and to a lesser extent upon the type of person he or she may be. And always, where ideas and images are present, it depends on their precise fitness to the occasion, and to the worshipper.

In the case of the Nativity, of that scene in the stable of which we have all seen countless representations, how very different they are from one another and, without doubt, from what the event they are depicting really looked like to anyone who was present at the time! But even more numerous and various are the pictures of it which arise to-day, or in any Advent season, in the imaginations of individual Christians when they turn their thoughts to this "far-off divine event to which the whole creation moves". And among these, doubtless, are some whose inner sense presents them, as it were spontaneously, with a vivid and fairly firm imagination of the scene, upon which their attention can dwell, perhaps roam from the ox to the straw, from the holy babe to the blessed mother. But others, of less imaginative power, see no such complete picture; when they think of the words of the sacred narrative, they get fragmentary glimpses of one item after another, as they once had the sight or sound of it in childhood, or as they remember seeing it in some picture; and even these are vague, fading and inconsistent, for they pay little or no attention to them but only to what they can think in words about the story and its meaning. It is the meaning, some would say, which matters most. Perhaps so, but of these two kinds of worshippers, the former is the more likely to be deepening his sense of the event as something *historic*, as a pivotal reality of the world in which we live.

THREE TYPES OF WORSHIPPERS

According to our different gifts of imagination and thought, the meaning of the Nativity, too, if essentially one and the same, presents itself differently.

I.

Let us imagine three individuals of different kinds, whose minds are moved this Christmas to venerate the new-born King ; and let the first be one of those who make little or no conscious use of the imagination, either in work or in play. Unless he is following the words of a book, or has a picture or a carving presented to him, a man of this kind feels as though he has nowhere to go to pay his homage, for the scene and the characters do not naturally arise before his inward eye. To him the innumerable artistic representations he has seen may even be, in a sense, a hindrance, for he cannot reproduce them, and if he merely thinks about them they are so variously staged and costumed as to give him the feeling that nobody knows ; to him it is almost as if this historic reality were of the same order as that philosophic " thing-in-itself " which no one can or ever could apprehend by the senses. But as a Christian he does not, of course, think like that ; so, when he disposes himself to adore at the stable of Bethlehem, he revolves in his memory the things that tradition has told him of it ; he considers it as a fact of the past which is an essential cause of this religious life of the present in which he is so thankful to be living. Christmas, the festival itself and its ceremonies, may occupy much of his mind, whilst others use this time trying to intensify or recreate, as it were, the Church's corporate memory of an eternal moment in human history which both was her physical beginning and in some way expresses her continual renewal ; this worshipper will be reflecting rather upon what the Church is now doing about it, perhaps even to some quite practical purpose. This, of course, is no less appropriate ; and whoever meditates upon the visible influence and temporal effects of past happenings which are mysteries of the Faith, contributes also to their abiding reality in time.

II.

But let us think of another worshipper, probably less given to practical thought and action, whose mind has been much turned in upon itself by the whole course of his emotional life. This has made him more conscious of mental forms and images which are intensified by emotional tensions and which, when one notices them, tend also to become more vivid. They may sometimes

sharpen into pictures, or pictorial fragments as clearly shaped and coloured as those we know in dreams. And if, as with such a man it may, the dream-life sometimes goes on partly in the light of the waking life, he becomes strongly aware of those powerful forces which are always at work upon this level of the mind's activity that we call "dreaming", but which are, in fact, also playing some part all the time, in or behind our conscious thinking. They can do this no less because we seldom realize what they are, or even that they are present.

This man has come to know by intimate experience something of these powers behind or within the soul of man, of which our recent psychologists have found out so much, though they have been able to do so little good with their discoveries. He knows, for instance, as they know, that these forces are partly super-personal, and seem to be the same in all people though they affect them differently; that some seem to be trying to influence us to worse courses and some to better. They do not act merely as forces, but more like beings, as though there were angels and devils always at work, striving to deflect or over-rule our individual destinies. But this man is a Christian, and spiritual beings, angels and devils are, in fact, just what Christians have always believed those things to be. So he is not surprised when the profoundest of the present-day psychologists says that he finds these psychic forces, or spiritual beings, to be of different orders, some being of lesser power and authority than others, and that some of them (which this psychologist calls "archetypes") are able to over-rule a number of others. Nor is he surprised to see that most psychologists, when they try to understand and classify these powers or beings, in a new kind of science or secular knowledge, find it hard to determine which of them are the stronger, the good or the evil ones, and are even a little confused as to which is which. For the Christian believes that such discrimination is beyond man, except through the aid of "revelation"; that is, through something that happened in the clear memory of mankind, a happening by which God spoke to Man and showed him.

So, when this man I am thinking of comes to worship before the manger, he is one of those who will probably be holding a

fairly clear picture of it in his mind ; he will prefer, most likely, thus to employ his gift of imagination, since it is one of the powers of the mind. And the picture that will arise within his senses will be not only vivid and enriched with many images of the event which the reading of scripture or the works of writers and artists have suggested to him. It will move him as a presentation of one of the very deepest, most powerful beings of the kind we have just mentioned. In it he will recognize one of those "archetypes" which work at the profoundest level of man's being and also over-rule his loftiest aspirations. The image he forms is, of course, his own and of little importance ; but the fact of history it represents calls to something not in him only, but implicit in the soul of every man, woman and child. For whether we realize it dimly or clearly, or resist it altogether, this being is active in us all the time, if only at that depth which we call "unconscious". Motherhood in its divinity and childhood in its perfection—these are not only real ideals, but ideal realities. When they are suggested or presented to our minds, either in actual life or in the imagination, they call with power to beings within our being, and equally real within all of us. There is only one of these ideal realities of which the image may be said to call to a being in the soul at a level as deep or even deeper, and that is the sublime and terrible image of the same Child grown to manhood, giving himself to agony and death for the salvation of all and for the vindication of God's love to man. But here, in the Nativity, is the image of the love itself, incarnate in the form of mother-love, the only perfect love we know in nature. It could not appear in its perfection without the poverty and hardship of the setting. Nor could the Mother and Child body forth this power that lives within the soul of man, if there were any earthly husband or father in the case, or if there were not that dark background in which the usurper king and his servile accomplices are seeking for the child to destroy him.

So as this worshipper gazes upon the divine lovers, whose worth is seen only by angels singing in heaven or by poor shepherds and a faithful carpenter on earth, he gives thanks for a supreme happening of history, which has revealed, once and for all, the full meaning of one of those archetypal beings by which man lives, and is himself. Only by that revelation, he feels, could the

conflicting beings that war within his soul be brought into order, discipline and peace. For the power in the soul to which this image speaks has great authority over the other powers, and is strengthened when he holds this image in his mind. To worship it is a means by which man can become what God meant him to be.

III

A third kind of worshipper, of which there are not so many, is that which, confronted with this divine event, thinks more about its meaning to the mind than to the soul. These are the metaphysicians. They may or may not hold in their minds vivid imaginations of what they are worshipping ; but, accustomed to study the laws of thought, which are timeless, they have little difficulty in imagining themselves two thousand years into the past.

To give an extraordinary, extreme, but, I hope, not too difficult example of what such a man may think—it may suddenly occur to him to say, as he looks at the Mother and her new-born Infant, “God created the world just over nine months ago”¹ What can he mean by this startling and, at first sound, very uncanonical saying ? He cannot be thinking, obviously, that the world came into existence at the Annunciation, if we measure time by the clock, which is the time of history and indeed the only “time” we usually mean by the word. But he has just been thinking that there is another kind of “time”, or rather another element or constituent in time which makes time as we know it possible—an element which he calls “metaphysical time”. And this metaphysical time, he thinks, did have an absolute beginning, whereas we know nothing of the beginning of the time that we measure by the rotation of the heavenly bodies or of our dial-hands.

So this worshipper, looking at the divine Mother and Child, is suddenly struck by the thought, “Here is the first manifestation that metaphysical time has begun.” He feels convinced

¹ For a description of the man who had this idea, see Professor Denis Saurat's *The Christ of Chartres*. The late Mr. Charles Williams entertained a very similar thought about the Nativity.

that, at the moment we now recall as the Annunciation, when the Word became flesh, this element clove into the flux of mere temporal successive happenings. Historical time, as we know it, at once became actual and began to expand both ways, before and after that initial moment, as the sound of a gong that is struck radiates out in all directions. This, he begins to think, must be the reason why the knowledge of history B.C. gradually extends backwards and lights up earlier times whilst we ourselves are progressing in the years A.D. So the people who lived before the Virgin Birth were living in a sense, towards the centre and source of time, whilst we live moving away from it !

As the metaphysician tries to conceive what sort of difference this must have made to the minds of pre-Christian people, his thought fails and grows rather obscure ; yet still his heart leaps and delights in the thought that here, in the Nativity, one element of time itself was born. For whereas most scientific and materialistic thinkers only believe in God just a little—just enough to think that He can create the world by one tiny, almost insignificant step at a time, in the process called evolution—this man believes that time is not at all what they think, and that God is infinitely greater—that He could create the whole universe, everything in full splendour, in one supreme and single action ; and there is a sense in which He actually did so.

That, you may think, is a strange way to worship in the holy stable. Some will think it is only a man with a remarkably resourceful and supple mind performing some singular and entertaining motions with it, as in a well-known story a certain acrobat did before the image of the Blessed Virgin because he knew no other way of showing his love. And as, in that legend, Our Lady gave the *jongleur* a sign that his curious homage was accepted, so we need not despise this metaphysician as merely phantastical even if we think his notion highly imaginary.

Taken too literally, the idea would be heretical—that is, if it were so understood as to endanger that reality of time which is a foundation both of our common sense and of the order of divine revelation. But we should be attentive, without being credulous, to all images and ideas that arise spontaneously in relation to an act of worship. Those who have good minds can

employ them most worthily in distinguishing what is right in them from what is wrong. When people worshipped much more than they seem to now, the metaphysically-minded were continually occupied in winnowing the false from the true in ideas which arose in devout minds, ideas not a whit less curious than those we have just been considering, and they did not find this either unprofitable to faith or irrelevant to life. Nowadays we think that the intellect is properly employed only in extending our knowledge of external nature ; we often allude with some scorn to those Christian intellectuals who are said, rather misleadingly, to have wasted much time trying to find out how many angels could stand on the point of a pin. But whether it is really more useful to find out how many electrons an atom will explode into is a question that still awaits its answer.

* * *

Too active a mind may be dangerous applied to either study, and there are also perils in too vivid an imagination. The first worshipper we mentioned seems, after all, to stand upon the safest ground. And yet he too, is helpless by himself and, unaided by the gifts of the other two, might easily sink into a kind of religious materialism. They all need one another's influence if they are to find again, each year, the holy stable and its occupants, just as they were on the day of the Nativity. Then all that they have done, imagined or thought about the Holy Family in the meantime falls away ; the bare reality speaks for itself. And once more at the nadir of worldly insignificance they see the treasure at which the heavens break into song.

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